



Philanthropy: Its Power and Influence

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Where does public power reside in America?

Power and influence exist not only in the government's executive, legislative and judicial branches or in political parties or government agencies or in various business and interest group lobbies or in the corporations whose decisions about office and plant locations, investment, hiring and production levels, and products to produce or services to offer do so much to shape the economy.

Power also lies in partisan-aligned think tanks, like the Brookings Institutions, the Center for American Progress and the Century Foundation on the liberal left and the Heritage Foundation, Hoover Institution and the Cato, Hudson, Manhattan and American Enterprise institutes on the right, which serve as the intellectual infrastructure that provides the political parties with their legislative strategies, policy proposals and talking points in the ideological war of ideas.

Advocacy groups and NGOs allied with the political parties (like MoveOn.org or NARAL) also participate in the structures of power, as do the politically affiliated media: not just Fox News or MSNBC or talk radio or small political magazines and websites, but The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and The Washington Post.

All of these power centers operate, as the late great political historian Alan Brinkley put it, "with remarkable coordination and discipline (<https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/9068>)."

To understand power in the United States, it's essential to think, as the historical sociologist and political scientist Theda Skocpol has argued so compellingly, about the polity, the expansive network of institutions that exist outside the government itself yet play a crucial role in shaping policy, priorities, coalitions, discourse and public debate. Even if, superficially, Skocpol's polity approach sounds a bit like another term for pluralism, it isn't. It's much more attentive to the dynamics of power and influence.

Among the truly distinctive features of the American polity is the role and impact of the major foundations. You don't need to be a conspiracy theorist (as an example, see Rene A. Wormser's 1958 volume, *Foundations: Their Power and Influence*) to recognize these philanthropic organizations' powerful presence.

To take one instance: in his magisterial biography of sex researcher Alfred Kinsey, James H. Jones examines, in stunning detail, how the Rockefeller Foundation's funding influenced academic research through its outsized support for the National Research Council and how it set

the agenda for sex research through its funding of the Committee for Research in Problems of Sex.

Unfortunately, historical research on foundations' influence and impact remains fragmented, despite the intrepid efforts of scholars like the late Peter Dobkin Hall, one of the giants in the study of American philanthropic and nonprofit history, who played a leadership role in the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action, Yale's Program on Nonprofit Organizations and Harvard's Hauser Institute for Civil Society prior to his death in 2015.

Now, in his fascinating study of the origins of the movement to reform American higher education, *Other People's Colleges*, Ethan W. Ris, who teaches educational leadership at the University of Nevada at Reno, explores in rich detail the early-20th-century Rockefeller and Carnegie-funded efforts to rationalize American higher education and the backlash those initiatives prompted.

Much as the banker J. P. Morgan sought to rationalize the American economy, reduce competition and stabilize profits through a process of consolidation; forming such industrial giants as General Electric, U.S. Steel and International Harvester; reorganizing the nation's railroad system; and insisting that companies adopt modern approaches to organizational management, foundations founded by John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie sought to restructure, rationalize and professionalize American higher education and transform it into a coherent system. Indeed, as Ris points out, reorganizing higher education was among their top priorities, predating later health and poverty initiatives.

Using of the power of the purse, the Carnegie Foundation helped standardize the student experience and faculty workloads around the credit hour. In exchange for funding faculty pensions, the foundation required the institutions it supported to require entering students to have completed a high school college-prep curriculum and to compel institutions to adopt a four-year course of study for graduation. In addition, the foundation supported a certification system that defined which institutions met minimal quality standards.

Standardization and social efficiency were key parts of the foundation vision; so, too, was another defining feature of the new industrial order, differentiation of function. To reduce redundancy, the "academic engineers" (as Ris calls the reformers) wanted lesser resourced institutions to disappear or to become vocational, technical or industrial institutions, normal colleges or junior colleges.

Among the book's many strengths is its pointed rejection of teleology. Far from an inevitable byproduct of impersonal economic, bureaucratic and organizational forces, the modernization of the American system of higher education was a product a previously hidden politics, which resulted in an uneasy compromise between the foundation vision—of a highly hierarchical system, headed by about 100 elite institutions—and a pluralistic, decentralized ideal, without central oversight or coordination.

Today's higher ed ecosystem combines elements of both visions. It's highly stratified in terms of prestige, wealth and student qualifications. But the landscape is also highly accessible to those who can pay the price and highly diverse in terms of institutional size, mission, geographical location and resources. It also consists of a host of organizations: the Association of American

Universities (for major research universities), the American Association of Colleges and Universities, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, and many more.

It's noteworthy that the outcome in undergraduate education differed dramatically from what occurred in legal and medical education, which the funders also sought to reform and where their efforts to standardize the curriculum and eliminate supposedly weak institutions proved much more successful. The 1910 Flexner Report, produced with the support of the Carnegie Foundation, not only resulted in the elimination of proprietary medical schools, which had trained many women and African Americans, but placed the study of the biomedical sciences at the heart of the medical school curriculum, at the expense of training in the art of medical practice.

Somewhat similar developments took place in legal education, as reformers succeeded in eliminating not only many of the proprietary schools that had served the "ethnic bar" but the older practice of reading and apprenticing for the law. Instead of training lawyers for legal practice, the reformed law schools more closely resembled liberal arts colleges than the graduate schools that actually prepared engineers or architects to practice their craft.

As the astute legal commentator who goes by the pseudonym Unemployed Northeastern observed in an email message, "It is all too possible to graduate [from law school] without drafting, editing, arguing or even SEEING a single legal document. Or setting foot within a courtroom. Or knowing how to file things sufficient to be able to set foot in a courtroom. Or talking to a client. Or learning the first thing about properly handling client money (almost certainly the #1 thing that gets lawyers in disciplinary trouble). Or having an internship/externship/co-op/field experience worth a damn. Or writing any sort of paper outside of your final exams."

Ris's book is at once an impressive work of history, resting on prodigious archival research and a tract for our time, which offers a highly critical perspective on foundation's power and influence, which during the first third of the 20th century tended to be highly elitist and class-bound.

My own experience working with foundations has actually been quite positive. It is certainly true that many major foundations have embraced "strategic philanthropy." This is an approach in which foundation officers define an agenda and issue a public call for proposals or invite pre-identified schools to apply. Is such an approach prescriptive? Yes. But it has, in my opinion, resulted in more meaningful results than a less focused approach would do. Indeed, many of the most exciting and effective innovations in higher education, like CUNY's ASAP and TOP (Transfer Opportunity Project) initiatives, wouldn't exist without philanthropic support.

I'm especially impressed by the smaller foundations that punch far beyond their weight class, like Arnold Ventures and its strategy of evidence-based giving, and especially the Teagle Foundation, with its goal of strengthening the liberal arts. Their imprimatur makes all the difference in the world in trying to leverage institutional resources.

A provost once told me, "If a project's worth doing, someone else should pay for it." Wise words. A true test of an innovation's worth, scalability and replicability is whether a foundation is willing to invest in it.

I've been fortunate at crucial points in my own career to get just such investments: in the Digital History (<https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/>) website that's used by tens of thousands of distinct

IP addresses each week, which received support from the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History. Or two projects funded by the Teagle Foundation: a collegium on psychological science and student learning at Columbia and a series of virtual rounds at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, which allowed students to explore the diseases and medical conditions tested on the MCAT through five lenses: patient experience, biomedical science, socioeconomic, the history of disease and interprofessional care. Support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Howard Hughes Medical Institute helped to create an integrated, competency-aligned biomedical sciences pathway at UTRGV.

Money is power, and power can, of course, be used for good or ill. I look at the story that Ris has reconstructed so artfully and my reaction is somewhat different from his. Whatever mistakes and misjudgments foundations made in the past, I'm convinced that these institutions are among the best partners the educational innovators can hope to find.

I strongly advise you to reach out to foundation officers and see what they consider the biggest challenges facing higher education and the kinds of solutions their endowments are funding. The program officers' job is to survey the landscape, identify the most innovative and effective practices, and take them to scale.

A strong case can be made that foundations are the true if unsung drivers of academic innovation. If some of their initiatives didn't pan out or proved wrongheaded, the fact remains that the foundations that support higher education are the risk takers, visionaries and allies that colleges and universities need if we are to solve the challenge we face: how to give all students the same kind of learning opportunities that those who attend the most selective, richly resourced institutions or who are enrolled in honors colleges take as a matter of right